How I Blew Up Harold Snilly

Apios Tuberosa (pseud. Ted Kaczynski)

When I was in highschool I took a course in chemistry. There was only one aspect of the subject which interested me, as any chemist could have seen from a brief inspection of my rather specialized home collection of reagents: powdered aluminum, powdered magnesium, powdered zinc, sulfure, potassium nitrate, potassium permanganate…in suitable combinations, these things are capable of exploding.

One day in the laboratory, having finished my assigned experiment early, I thought I might as well spend the extra time pursuing my favorite line of research. On theoretical grounds, a mixture of red phosphorus and potassium clorate seemed promising. (I did not know at the time that it is the red phosphorus in the scratching surface of a match-book, together with the potassium clorate in the match-head, that makes a match light so readily. I later found that the mixture is extremely sensitive to friction and practically impossible to work with. The read is advised not to play with it.) Taking a minute quantity of each of these substances from my collection of reagents, I carefully mixed them, and applied them, with the tip of a spatula, to a bunsen-burner flame. The result was a small but promising POP.

Now, at the table behind me was seated an individual by the name of Harold Snilly (the name is fictitious, of course), who was more noted for irresponsibility than for intelligence. It happened that my experiment came to his attention. His interest was immediately and intensely arouse, and naturally he asked me the ingredients of the mixture. I would like to make it clear to any of my old schoolmates who may read this that, contrary to the rumors current at the time, my sole error and sole guilt in the matter lay in the fact that I civilly and truthfully answered Harold Snilly's question.

To the adolescent mind, there is a vague aura of romance and excitement about chemistry, an indefinite vision of dramatic reactions, fireworks, explosions. Perhaps it was this that led Harold Snilly to take chemistry, and perhaps he had been disappointed to find that the course was mostly drab routine, as with any other highschool subject. At any rate, his enthusiasm now knew no bounds. He immediately poured half a vial of red phosphorus and half a vial of potassium clorate onto a sheet of paper and began mixing them vigorously. Some of us who had had a little experience with this sort of mischief expostulated with him; pointed out to him the folly of conducting this kind of experiment in the classroom; suggested that, if he **must** do so, then at least he should not use so **much** of the stuff. But he was intent on his work, with a bright, happy face and excited eyes, and he did not answer or even seem to hear our warnings. One was

reminded of Toad in *Wind in the Willows*, sitting entranced in the middle of the road muttering "Poop-poop", oblivious to everything but the vision of the retreating motor-car on which his glazed eyes were fixed. In the chemicals before him on the table, Harold Snilly saw the beautiful flower of fresh new experience, of freedom, of adventure.

Harold Snilly began rolling his chemicals up tightly in the sheet of paper. Seeing that all argument was in vain, I washed my hands of the matter and turned my back. About two seconds later there was an ear-shattering report. I turned around, and there stood Harold Snilly, rubbing his singed palms together, with a strange perplexed and faintly reproachful expression on his face. The beautiful flower had suddenly turned to ashes in his hands—very suddenly and very literally turned to ashes. Our teacher, Mr. Bland, came running out of the supply room where he had been busy, and hauled off Harold Snilly, first to the school nurse (unfortunately he had sustained no significant injury) and then to the chamber of inquisition.

After interrogating Harold Snilly, and extracting from him…who knows what truths or falsehoods? Mr. Bland returned grim-faced to the classroom, stalked up to my table, and asked me what I knew of the matter. I told him, and was in my turn marched off to the inquisitorial chamber. The upshot was that I was suspended from the chemistry lab for two weeks and Harold Snilly was kicked out of the class altogether. I thought it a little unfair that I should be punished for Harold Snilly's misdeed. Still, I was not very displeased at being relieved from two weeks of laboratory work.

Whether it was the result of Harold Snilly's reluctance to ascribe his misfortune to his own foolishness, or simply due to the general laws according to which rumor operates, I was somehow credited among all of the student body and some of the teachers with the lion's share of responsibility for the affair. In popular imagination, I was the mad scientist and Harold Snilly my innocent victim.

My physics teacher was one of those rare teachers with a genuine and spontaneous sense of humor. At the end of the school year I was presented with a rather tawdry award (sponsored by some corporation) for having supposedly been the best science student in the school. When my physics teacher handed me the medal, he informed me that "We decided to give you this for trying to blow up Harold Snilly." Harold Snilly was in some quarters regarded as a pest.

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Retrieved on 22 December 2014 from
http://thejournal.link/staff/~johnfjacobi/misc/harold-snilly/
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